

# The Two Faces Of Michael Brown

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The death of Michael Brown may have been unwarranted, but there are bigger issues here that affect all American citizens.



Michael Brown, another victim of a police shooting.

There may have been two Michael Browns, but there are increasingly two Americas: there is the land of the free and the home of the brave, which is now little more than a fiction, and there is the encroaching police state in which you are guilty until proven innocent, in which Big Brother watches your every move and reads all your e-mails without warrant, and in which you can be gunned down like a dog for a misdemeanour or because the man with the badge thinks it best to shoot first and ask questions later. There is no real debate about which of these societies most Americans want; the bad news is that as things stand, the choice is not theirs to make.

The death of Michael Brown at the hands of a police officer at Ferguson, Missouri in August last year led to both serious public disorder and heated debate. It is fair to say that if the shooter – Darren Wilson – had not been white, and Brown himself had not been black there would have been no public disorder and very much less debate. Broadly speaking there were two sides to the argument: on the left there were those parroting the mantra “Black lives matter” who blamed the police unequivocally; on the right there were those who said basically that Brown deserved it. This divide was not entirely racial, some black conservatives lining up with white *racists* and the police, who possessing a privilege money can't buy, defended their own more or less unconditionally.

As if often the case, an incident that is witnessed by many people produced not one consistent account but several conflicting ones. In this case they ranged from Wilson having little or no alternative to shooting Brown dead, to the shooting being little more than cold-blooded murder. The stockily-built Brown was portrayed by the former camp as the proverbial gentle giant, even though footage was soon released of him using muscle to rob a local store. Much later, further footage came to light of Brown viciously assaulting and robbing a much older man; as the victim was black, the usual arguments do not wash. Both these videos and a lot more can be found on YouTube. The latter especially tends to reinforce the argument that Brown was a waste of space, and his death was his own damned fault. What is missing from this equation?

The simple fact is that Michael Brown was 18 years old, and 18 year olds, especially 18 year old males, are renowned for neither wisdom nor humility. True, there are many exceptions, but often today's juvenile delinquents grow up to become tomorrow's model citizens. A cynic might suggest that in view of his willingness to resort to violence, Brown would have made a good police officer himself. Alas, he will never now have the chance to transform himself into a model citizen.

So why did Michael Brown die? There are a number of reasons, but race is not one of them. The two most important are America's insane gun culture, and the fact that the American police in particular have come to see themselves not as servants of the people but as their controllers.

The US is far from the only nation that has an armed citizenry, but there is something truly perverse about America's love affair with *The Devil's Right Hand*. At times, people are shot literally at the drop of a hat, something that – the current political turmoil aside – doesn't happen even in Islamic countries. You can't have an armed citizenry and an unarmed police force, and if you have members of the public running around shooting people for no good reason, it should surprise no one when the police err on the side of caution.

The issue of police controlling rather than simply protecting the public is even more important, because it is this arrogance that leads to them shooting innocent people in the first place. Firearms aside, there have been far too many instances of the police practising outright thuggery on the public, white as well as black, women as well as men. At one time this was dismissed as exaggeration or even lies, but the filming of the disgraceful March 1991 Rodney King incident changed all that. Today of course, many people walk around with camera-phones in their pockets, the quality of the resulting film is generally excellent, and it can be zapped worldwide within seconds. Yet what did we see in the wake of the Brown shooting? The militarisation of the town, and increasingly the militarisation of America.